

STAEL, Mme DE

Mme. Stael: an appreciation. Anne Marie Germaine Necker, (1766-1817), commonly known as Mme. de Stael, was a distinguished French woman of letters, novelist, salon presider, and lifetime enemy of Napoleon. She left her mark on many aspects of French literature and culture in the 19th century.

Mme. de Stael: life and works. Mme. de Stael was born in Paris, daughter of the prominent French-Swiss banker, Jacques Necker, who was at the time Prime Minister of France under Louis XVI. During her childhood she spent much time in the salon of her mother—a salon frequented by such luminaries as Buffon, Marmontel, and Edward Gibbon, who were charmed by the brilliant youngster. Her mother devoted much attention to Germaine's education, which was consciously modeled on the pedagogy of Jean Jacques Rousseau, blended with a strong dose of Calvinist discipline. In 1792 the Reign of Terror led to the dismissal of Necker as Prime Minister; whereupon the family moved to Switzerland; from which Mme. de Stael returned to Paris in 1797, setting up her own salon. (In 1785 she had been married to a legate of the Swedish Embassy in France, but this relationship appears to have been tepid at best, and Mme. de Stael continued to engage intimately with the most distinguished literary men of the time, in particular Benjamin Constant, the author of *Adolphe*. Mme. de Stael maintained a stout opposition to Napoleon, throughout this time, and in 1803 that opposition led to her second banishment from Paris. For the next ten years she traveled in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy. Especially drawn to German Romanticism, she wrote *De l'Allemagne* (1813), *On Germany*, which was an eye opener for the French, who had long been unacquainted with developments in their neighboring country across the Rhein. As a result of this widely read publication Mme. de Stael earned herself banishment from all of France—Napoleon had come out badly in the text. In 1815 she was once more allowed to return to Paris, where she spent the last two years of her life entertaining in her salon, and editing her works.

Mme. de Stael's work. Mme. de Stael created both novels and extensive books of literary and cultural criticism. Her sentimental novels, *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne* (1807) were great hits, not least because they drew attention to the intense actual inner life of the women conventionally treated, in literature, as mothers and window dressing for their husbands. Far more important than these novels are her two critical treatises. *On Literature considered In its relation to Social Institutions* (1800) she suggests that one must not judge a work by an absolute and objective standard, but must take into consideration the social, political, religious, and philosophical environment in which it was written. In *On Germany* (1813) she examines German customs, literature, philosophy, ethics, and religion. She introduces the French reading public to such prominent but in France little known thinkers as Lessing, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller. She urges a closer intellectual relationship between France and Germany. Her enthusiasm popularized German Romanticism in France, and in other countries of Europe and was a most potent force in bringing about the triumph of French Romanticism.

Reading

Primary source reading

Delphine, tr. Goldberger, 1995.

Secondary Source Reading

Fairweather, M., *Mme. de Stael*, 2006.

Further Reading

Herold, J., *Mistress to an Age: A Life of Mme. de Stael*, 2002.

Original language reading

Bredin, Jean-Denis: *Une singuliere famille: Jacques Necker, Suzanne Necker, Germaine de Stael*, 1999.

Suggested paper topics

What caused the remarkable influence of Mme. de Stael's *De l'Allemagne*? To answer this, look into the geopolitics of the time, which created an almost total break between the French and German cultures which met at the Rhine.

Look into Mme. de Stael's fiction. Try *Delphine*, to see how de Stael viewed the inner sentiments of women in her society. Is it easy for you to imagine a culture in which literature of this sort was all the rage? (It was.)

Excerpt

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Anne_Louise_Germaine_de_Sta%C3%ABl

. We cease loving ourselves if no one loves us.

Love is the whole history of a woman's life; it is an episode in a man's.

The evil arising from mental improvement can be corrected only by a still further progress in that very improvement. Either morality is affable, or the more enlightened we are, the more attached to it we become.

If we would succeed in works of the imagination, we must offer a mild morality in the midst of rigid manners; but where the manners are corrupt, we must consistently hold up to view an austere morality.

One must, in one's life, make a choice between boredom and suffering.

A man must know how to fly in the face of opinion; a woman to submit to it

It seems to me that life's circumstances, being ephemeral, teach us less about durable truths than the fictions based on those truths; and that the best lessons of delicacy and self-respect are to be found in novels where the feelings are so naturally portrayed that you fancy you are witnessing real life as you read.

In matters of the heart, nothing is true except the improbable.

Superstition attaches to this life, and religion to the next; superstition is allied to fatality, and religion to virtue; it is from the vivacity of earthly desires that we become superstitious, and it is, on the contrary, by the sacrifice of these same desires that we are religious.

Life often seems like a long shipwreck, of which the débris are friendship, fame, and love.